



Everyone needs a home

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HOMES FIRST SOCIETY'S HISTORY

Homes First Society was established in 1983 by a group of organizations working directly with individuals experiencing homelessness on the streets of Toronto. From the beginning, our goal has been to develop and implement creative and innovative solutions to the many challenges of housing the homeless.

Homes First was founded as a new response to an old problem. Our approach is to build and/or manage non-profit housing by organizing homeless people to identify their own housing needs and necessary support services, and to have a voice in ongoing property management decisions.

Our first project was opened on Shuter Street in the heart of downtown Toronto in 1984. A new building containing seventeen shared accommodation apartments consisting of seventy-seven units, Shuter was the first housing project for single people in the City of Toronto. It won an Ontario Award for Outstanding Model Project during the International Year of Shelter for the Homeless in 1987.

With the support of the City of Toronto and the Province of Ontario, Homes First later converted a warehouse into 'StreetCity' which opened in 1989. Designed as a self-contained village complete with streets, housing units, a variety store, and an internally-run 'bank', StreetCity became home to seventy single men and women who had not been served by the existing emergency housing system. The first of its kind, StreetCity drew world-wide attention and became a model for other projects in Canada and the United States.

Based on StreetCity, Strachan House is a converted warehouse containing eleven 'houses', each with its own kitchen, bathroom, and common area, connected by a network of 'streets'. There is a total of eighty-three units at Strachan, each with its own front door and a window onto the 'street'. The architects of Strachan House worked closely with Homes First development staff and tenants in the design of the site, and in 1999, they received the Governor General's Medal of Excellence for the design.

In response to a growing need, Strachan House has undergone an evolution in its placement strategy as it is increasingly looked to by the City of Toronto, CAMH, and all major hospitals within the City, as the only program willing and capable of housing clients with the most extreme complex issues and difficult needs.

Savards is a hostel containing thirty beds for women with a long history of homelessness and mental illness. Developed by Homes First and the Women's Street Survivors Resource Group, Savards was designed to offer a high-tolerance, low-demand environment. Many women who were too frightened to use the existing hostel system feel safe at Savards. It was the first of its kind and remains unique in the City of Toronto. It has been an incredible success; however, Savards has been temporarily closed due to the current pandemic, and the Savards program was relocated to the Strathcona Hotel Program.

The St. Clair Shelter is an emergency shelter, serving men and women. The number of beds have been reduced due to Covid, and most clients were relocated to either the Strathcona Hotel or to the Willowdale Welcome Centre. Before HFS began managing this Shelter in 2009, it primarily served

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temporarily homeless working people and still includes many. HFS has broadened this shelter's mandate to ensure access for individuals who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, and/or who have mental health issues and/or who are refugees.

The Kennedy Shelter opened in December 2016, as a sixty-bed women's emergency shelter. Within two weeks of opening, the Shelter was at capacity and continues to operate at nearly 100% capacity every day. As one of five shelters chosen by the City of Toronto in 2018 to pilot a new service model, Kennedy now has a supervised team of Intensive Case Management Workers along with a Community Engagement and Client Program Coordinator.

In April of 2019, Homes First opened Bathurst-Lake Shore, a 100-bed co-ed shelter. The Bathurst-Lake Shore location was on the site of an existing respite run by Fred Victor. When Fred Victor relocated the following month, we took over operation of an additional floor, adding 100 beds, this time for couples. In December of 2019, the "Lower Level" was opened as a Winter Respite for men. At its peak, the building had an overall capacity of 285. With the arrival of Covid, however, and the subsequent need for bed removal, this has been lowered to just over 150, with approximately 50 per floor.

In November 2019, Homes First was asked by the City to operate the Willowdale Welcome Centre, a refugee shelter for 200 single adults. A team of Intensive Case Management Workers with specific knowledge and experience in this area were put in place, and several partnerships were arranged with organizations that focus on settlement services. In April of 2020, the second building on the campus – "Building B" added beds in response to a request from the City to help support adult singles displaced from other shelters as part of their need to reduce beds because of Covid. Capacity eventually reached 79.

In April 2020, Strathcona Hotel was opened as a part of the City's Emergency Covid Response, supporting the immediate reduction in dorm capacity across shelters between Homes First and Dixon Hall. Strathcona has in its first few months of operation been a very stable program with little turnover. The few rooms that come available are filled by existing Homes First clients from our other shelters.

In June of 2020, Homes First was approached by the City to operate a shelter for single adults and couples at the Delta Hotel in Scarborough. The City coordinated the first occupants, who came from the encampments that have sprung up throughout the downtown core. The referrals since have come through the Streets to Homes program.

Homes First manages fourteen housing programs, including Strachan House, offering nearly 400 units of affordable housing, making us one of the largest non-profit housing providers in the City. We also currently operate nine shelters or respites, along with two Warming Centres, with a total capacity of close to 1000 beds.